

Community of the Beloved

A sermon for Proper 7C, 2025

The Revd Andrew Rampton

What does a community of the beloved children of God look like in a world so concerned with personal gain and relationships of power?

Today's passage from Luke's gospel picks up right where we left off last Sunday. Jesus is addressing his disciples on the plain below a mountain where they had gone to pray. Around this group has gathered an extended crowd, just as happens at any large, public event today. The instructions Jesus is giving are addressed to his disciples, "you who listen,"¹ and before today's portion of the sermon, he reminds them to listen carefully.

At the centre of this teaching are commandments about how the disciples will treat others. Jesus begins by instructing them to love those who hate them and bless those who curse them. This is not held up as an example of extraordinary charity or special effort, this is given as an instruction to all who are listening. This is the expectation of every disciple.

The instruction may not have seemed as radical to the disciples on the plain as it does to us. There are teachings in their Jewish tradition that offer similar instructions,² though Jesus frames it in an intensified way.

There is also a question as to whether the instruction to bless those who curse you is meant

as something of a double-entendre. In the tradition that Jesus seems to be referencing, there is a comment that in showing charity and generosity to one's enemies, one is certainly doing a good and holy thing but also causing the enemy great irritation. What is more bothersome than being genuinely helped by someone that you can't stand? So when Jesus says, "Bless those who curse you," he is surely serious that this is the sign of a holy, godly person. But there may, at the same time, be just a hint of that Southern sentiment of "Oh, bless his heart."

Jesus goes on to describe what, since the 1700s, we have called "the Golden Rule". Do to others as you would have them do to you. This also seems to be an intensification of existing Jewish teaching, such as the instructions in Leviticus³ and Tobit.⁴ The familiar teachings are focused on the avoidance of doing what is hateful or not good, while Jesus is emphasizing the proactive. It is not enough to avoid the bad, a disciple must actively seek to do the good.

Jesus is describing a community of disciples who are consistently looking out for the health, flourishing and good of their neighbour. Not because they expect any kind of return on investment, nor because of an exterior obligation the way slaves treat their masters well. The love in this community is shared and it is reciprocal, but because the members of the community are motivated by the good of their neighbour, not by personal gain.

This idea, and the radical nonviolence that Jesus weaves into it, is deeply important to early Christians. Love of enemies, blessing when cursed, turning the other cheek, and dedication

¹Luke 6:27

²Proverbs 25:21, "If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink."

³Leviticus 19:18, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."

⁴Tobit 4:15, "And what you hate, do not do to anyone."

to care of neighbour are repeated in the writings of St Justin Martyr and the *Didache*. Both of these records are composed in periods when Christianity is illegal in the Roman Empire and the threat of imprisonment or execution are heavy on the minds of our ancestors in the faith. For a persecuted people, so close to Jesus and the apostles, to so deeply enshrine these ideas speaks volumes about their importance.

Jesus goes on to remind the disciples that, as they love their enemies and all of their neighbours, judgement and condemnation are not part of their calling. Now, this is not to say that disciples should ignore moral discernment. We must be able to tell the difference between good and bad if we are to be the loving, generous, compassionate people that Jesus describes in this sermon.

In the verses beyond today's reading, we are reminded of the danger of being too critical of others and too lenient of ourselves. Pointing out the speck in a neighbour's eye while ignoring the log in our own. It seems that, when Jesus admonishes us away from judgement and condemnation, he means that as we discern right from wrong and work to love even those who hate us, we must be careful never to judge ourselves or a neighbour as being beyond redemption. After all, we cannot know the future and both judgement and redemption are God's business, not ours.

It is easy to love those who love us and to join in community with those we find agreeable. This is not a particularly Christian behaviour; Jesus points out that most people behave this way. What marks Christians as different is their commitment to loving the unloved. They meet violence with peace. They visit the prisoner without concern for their guilt or innocence. They show generosity to those in need. They

work to form a community people that includes everyone, even those who hate them. This is, truly, a community of the beloved children of God.